856 864 During a girl's early childhood beginning when she is still nursing, a mother with foresight will work to make her organs as perfect as possible. By applying pressure repeatedly and for long periods, she molds, so to speak, the outside in order to make it narrow, as this quality is greatly valued by our people.

It is the mother, too, who trains the girl in her preparations for married life. She teaches her how to behave toward her future husband, and at the same time instructs her in the duties of a good housewife (see Chapter X, Article VIII).

836 864 Certain forms of behavior, although their relationship to our subject is only superficial and external, must nevertheless be mentioned. An adult man will often take in his arms a little girl who has not yet been weaned, or perhaps only slightly more developed. He considers this child to be his wife. He has paid no bride price for her. But since she is a sister, cousin, or other relative of one of his wives, she is a "wife" from his point of view; that is, not only will it be possible for him to marry her later on, but even without becoming her husband he will enjoy a certain liberty in relation to her. (1) Thus, when such a man takes his young "wife" in his arms,

1. See Chapter VI, Article V, 2.

he is enjoying an anticipation of the future and speaks to her [66] in that sense, often accompanying his words with intimate caresses.

The same practice, mutatis mutandis, may be observed on the part of a woman toward a small boy whom she can consider as her "husband."

304 582 2. Circumcision

Circumcision is generally practiced. It is usually performed at an early age. Without going into the details at this point (1) or

1. They will be found in Chapter X, Article VII.

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which specifically expresses our idea of virginity, nor deduce from its absence that the thing itself is unknown to them. The Greeks and Romans were well acquainted with it, yet they had no precise word for it. Parthenos and Virgo mean simply "unmarried girl." The Germanic words such as Maagd and Jungfrau, which now signify "virgin," originally had the same meaning as the Greek and Latin terms.

585 836 The foregoing does not imply that every Nkundó girl is free to have sexual relations and that public opinion approves of libertinism among single people. We will examine this question in the following paragraphs.

896 164 2. Sexual relations between single people

In dealing with this question we must distinguish between relations between adults and the contacts between nonadults. We will therefore examine the two situations separately so that at the end we can attempt to explain the changes in native attitudes in this realm that have occurred. [80]

A. Before physical maturity. We will first relate what the natives tell about customary practices in the past, and then describe the practices of the present day.

In the past, sexual contacts between young people not yet marriageable were severely punished by their parents. The children were taught that those who were guilty would be struck down by a very serious illness which was inevitably fatal. This illness was called by the generic term ndota (1), and the more specific one, esémbéji.

1. Ndota is the name of the illness which is the punishment for an infraction of a sexual

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prohibition under any circumstances. I have heard these same terms used also by the natives in the vicinity of Coquilhatville.

The body becomes flabby and without strength, and this weakness ends in a fatal paralysis (byongɛ́ nnyǎnyuka or nkatɛ́ɛ́nɛ́). In addition, the girls feared that their sexual organs, not yet fully formed, would be torn. They were also imbued with a very intense fear: bofolu w'aende, "the fear of males," bofolu w'ámato, "the fear of females." They also feared death -- bɛ́lotɛ́kɛ́ iwɛ́. The parents added that sexual acts were free from danger only between persons of the requisite age.

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This does not mean that children did not commit indecent acts. The game of ioto, in which little girls try to cook (and which is always one of their favorite games (2) as it probably is throughout the

2. Some boys imitate this game in order to acquire the habit of preparing their own meals. Later they benefit from it on more than one occasion.

world), often gave rise to it. Small boys joined in the game in order to taste the meal. And quite naturally they began to play at "husband and wife," more or less. Often this game involved only innocent imitations, but other times touching and exhibitions occurred between children of the same sex or of opposite sexes. This game is far more dangerous nowadays, [81] because of a change in the attitude of young people toward sexual matters.

The game of yembankongo, in which boys, imitating monkeys, chase each other through the trees and creepers can -- and does - result in reprehensible scenes.

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In former times most girls were married before puberty. But their husbands did not touch them until they had completed their normal development.

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Among some individuals the fear of sexual relations was so deeply rooted that it persisted even beyond the age limit and was

582 conquered only by repeated assaults of passion. Thus it is generally
833 known among the natives that young women used to seek refuge in
864 their mother's house when the husband wanted to begin making use of his rights as a husband. The mother would try to persuade her daughter to submit to the law of life. But sometimes, if her child seemed too resistant, the mother made excuses for her and asked the husband to consider her daughter's youth. The man usually wanted to remain on good terms with his mother-in-law so he did not insist and resigned himself to waiting till nature influenced the spirit and heart of his wife.

Since young people were brought up in deep fear of dangerous relations, it should not surprise us that this feeling became a real habit and did not disappear spontaneously the moment a certain degree of liberty was permitted. As a matter of fact, could we not make similar observations in Europe?

This is the natural explanation for the praiseworthy degree of morality among adolescents in the past.

178 Nowadays all that has changed. The young people follow
836 where their passions lead them. Not the slightest check is placed on
864 their impulses. Parents pay only slight attention to the conduct of their children. [82] It is better not to inquire into the morality of modern youth. Husbands no longer respect the bodies of their adolescent brides, who are themselves quite used to a sexual life and eagerly look forward to it; and no longer know the feeling of "the fear of men." Should we then be astonished at the frightening de-
[164] crease in the birth rate (1) and the ever increasing spread of venereal

1. The natives say that in the past young wives quickly became pregnant. And now ...

diseases, which seem to have been unknown in the past?

The reasons for this change will be investigated further on, under the letter C.

836 B. Between adults. Here the Nkundó are very lenient. There is a difference, however, between the socio-legal and moral viewpoints, although as we shall see the latter is influenced by the former.

[82] A woman is entirely free, legally speaking, as long as the first payment on her bride price has not been made. No man has

562 exclusive rights over her. Hence the proverb: Mbĭmbo ĭle nd'ân'ŏimbo
836 ĭfa la nkŏlŏ, "boimbo fruit found under the tree have no owner; they
[539] belong to the first person who gathers them." Thus a girl for whom nothing has been paid belongs to no one. A woman free in this manner does not infringe on the rights of any man in her sexual relations. There are therefore no sanctions against her licentiousness.

836 Furthermore, the discovery of her activities gives rise to no
864 shame. At most more serious parents will rebuke children who go too far -- the girls because they abuse the body and reduce their value for a prospective marriage (2), the boys because they [83] run the risk

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2. Not that a smaller bride price would be given for them. But a serious man would rather not take a woman for wife who has "run around" a great deal and therefore is more likely to commit adultery, to be unfaithful, and less likely to become the mother of a numerous progeny.

of financial difficulties (the dangers of adultery, indemnity for childbirth with death as a result, etc.).

626 Public opinion is even more lenient than the parents. This
836 attitude is easy to understand: strangers need fear no unpleasant consequences. Errors of this sort are generally considered natural weaknesses, *provided that they do not occur too frequently.* For public opinion is hard on people who run from one to another; they are stigmatized with the name ebĭbŏĭ, "unfaithful, flighty, without intelligence or reasoning powers," or ebŏngĭ, a stronger term with the same meaning.

836 From all the foregoing should we deduce that every woman is free to indulge fully in fornication? On the basis of the above considerations we could frankly conclude the affirmative. The behavior that can be observed from day to day fully confirms this answer. Some people stray more or less accidentally, but for others the practice quickly becomes a habit. And it can be said of all of them that

836 they succumb to any favorable opportunity. The validity of this generalization is not affected by extremely rare exceptions which may be encountered and which are due either to a constitutional abnormality or to an extraordinarily firm Christian conviction. How should 834 178 these observations be reconciled with the statement so often heard from natives that the situation was entirely different before the coming of the white men? It was not unusual to see young women not only abstaining from sexual relations but having such a "fear of men" that they drove away seducers and defended their chastity by hitting them with a stick.

When the woman did not accept the young man's proposition, she considered it a grave insult. The initiator was entitled to no indemnity "for blows and wounds." The woman replied only in violent terms, in word or act. [84] Often she went and insulted the mother of the guilty party. When the latter was told the reason for this behavior, she could only turn on her misbehaving son and usually gave him a good talking to; if he was young enough she gave him a good beating. Thus the girl had every right to defend herself.

If the provocation gave rise to no complications in family or society, the parents paid a lot less attention. But they tried to teach [814] their children discretion in these dangerous matters, though their instruction primarily took the form of a lesson after an error was committed, or sometimes apropos of an incident that had befallen someone else. Some parents were very severe. These attitudes were based on a vague sense of morality which was not deduced from philosophical reasoning or religious or superstitious ideas but which was innate and instinctive so to speak. In addition, the fear of excesses and eventual social consequences no doubt also played a considerable [577] role. Excesses were feared above all, and an isolated occurrence was regarded more or less as a momentary weakness.

To form an accurate picture of the situation that existed in the past, we must not lose sight of the fact that, because of very early marriages, the number of young single women was necessarily limited.

562 836 The attitude toward single men was more lenient than toward girls, unless their behavior had any consequences and apart from the danger of their actions becoming habitual, leading inevitably to palavers.